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THE QUALITY OF MERCY"

HOW BRITISH PRISONERS OF WAR WERE
TAKEN TO GERMANY IN 1914



BY

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*Official Report based on the Statements
of British Officers and 77 N.C.O.s and Men*

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“THE QUALITY OF MERCY.”

How British Prisoners of War were taken to
Germany in 1914.

*“The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed—
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes;
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown. . . .
It is an attribute to God Himself.”*

THE majority of English people—certainly of those who live in country districts—have seen our German prisoners of war. They have remarked upon the size and strength of these men, upon their well-nourished condition, upon their happy and care-free demeanour. And, notwithstanding their recollections of Zeppelins and Gothas, of innocent women and children ruthlessly murdered on sea and land, of the unspeakable Belgian atrocities, of tales that their men-folk have brought back from the front, the English people have been glad to think that we have been great enough as a nation, now as in the past, to extend the quality of mercy to helpless and defenceless men.

Turn from that picture to the plain, true, dispassionate statements of forty-eight British officers and seventy-seven N.C.O.'s and men who were captured at different times between the outbreak of the war and the end of 1914. The sufferings of these brave soldiers—not fiends, not savages.

but straightforward, honest Britishers, who left their homes, and their families, and their friends to fight for the sacred cause of justice—were so horrible, so needlessly and wantonly cruel, to put it very mildly, that the British Government saw fit to issue a White Paper* upon the single subject of the railway transport. The tale these soldiers have to tell—a tale made up of 125 individual and independent statements—will leave no doubt in the mind of any reader, whether prejudiced or otherwise, that the Germans treated their first British prisoners with deliberate, intentional, ordered, and organized cruelty.

Three points stand out with peculiar and sinister sharpness. The first is that, on the rare occasions when these poor fellows met with the slightest kindness, when the ordinary human instinct was permitted for one moment to peep through, the credit must be given, not to educated Germans, not to wealthy Germans, not to German officers (one had almost written "brother-officers"), but to an humble sentry, a member of the guard, an insignificant under-officer. (That is a matter for our students of education to ponder.)

The second point is—and officers and men are here unanimous—that the behaviour of the German Red Cross was so vile as to be almost incredible. The story is always the same—any appeal to the German Red Cross, to the people who bore on their arms the sacred brassard which signifies the eternal charity of man to man, even in the heat and bitterness of warfare, was met with foul words and in-

**Report on the Transport of British Prisoners of War to Germany, August—December, 1914. (Miscellaneous, No. 3, 1918) [C.d. 8984]. 6d.*

finitely fouler deeds. The effect on these British soldiers may be judged from the fact that, even to-day, after a lapse of three and a half years, many of them cannot look at the Red Cross brassard without a feeling of instinctive dread.

And the third point is that, bad as the German officers were, vile as was the conduct of the men employed by the German Red Cross, the conduct of the German *women*, and especially the educated and wealthy women, was worse. Many officers and men bear witness to this, as will be seen later. One has only to think of the unfailing kindness, gentleness, self-sacrifice, heroism, and even martyrdom of the British Red Cross nurses to realize the horror with which these helpless and wounded men shrank from the jeering, spitting, vindictive “angels of mercy” that they met behind the German lines.

It is a little unfortunate for the Germans that all this damning evidence should have come to light at the very time when some record of magnanimity on the part of their womenfolk might have been urged in favour of the cessation of the reprisals by air on German towns. That is another and a very wide subject, yet so much may be said: the natural loathing which all decent people have for the necessity of inflicting wounds and death on non-combatants will certainly be mitigated after reading of the treatment our first prisoners received at the hands of German women. Even the children showed that “kultur” falls on fertile ground.

Let us take, first of all, the evidence “in favour” of the enemy.

“Through the kindness of a sentry,” says Captain

Beaman, R.A.M.C., who was taken from Mons to Torgau between September 1 and 4, 1914, "we were enabled to get some water in our dixies, which we fortunately brought with us."

"The guard was very good and kind to us," says Captain Browne, R.A.M.C., speaking of the same journey; "gave us their own bread and treated us well."

"The German soldiers gave us water at nights (when they thought they would not be seen doing so)." This is the evidence of Captain A. J. G. Hargreaves, Somerset Light Infantry, dealing with the same journey.

"A young German drummer boy," testifies Captain R. W. Thomas, of the Munster Fusiliers, who was taken from St. Quentin to Torgau about the end of September, 1914. "who had had his leg broken in the fight with my regiment, and who had seen me at Etreux, was in the same wagon with me, and several times when things were getting a little too hot interfered, telling them that I was an officer and was wounded in a good fight. This certainly had a quieting effect on several occasions."

"The under-officer," states Captain E. E. Orford, Suffolk Regiment, who was taken from Cologne to Torgau between October 9 and 11, 1914, "dashed out of the train, seized one of the women by the arm, and used some abusive language to her and made her bring some food for us, and also sent one of the others off for some hot coffee."

"If it had not been that the blacks were very decent fellows, we should have had absolutely no food the whole time." So testifies Lieut. C. E. Wallis, of the Loyal North Lancashire, taken from Laon to Mainz between October 30 and November 2, 1914. The "blacks" were Senegalese

prisoners travelling in the same compartment, and cultured Germans will doubtless relish the moral.

“A Belgian girl, seeing me lying there shivering, brought me a warm blanket and gave me coffee and bread, which was very welcome.” This is from the evidence of Captain H. Master, Royal West Surreys, taken to Munster in October, 1914.

“The dog came up to me and licked my face, whereupon the officer kicked it.” Thus testifies Lieut. H. G. Henderson, Duke of Wellington’s Regiment, taken from Tourcoing to Osnabrück between November 12 and 14, 1914.

Here the evidence “in favour” fittingly ends. “Blacks,” sentries, poor Belgian girls, and dogs! Such formed the sole friends of our suffering heroes in the hands of the Germans during the early days of the war. That such small kindnesses should be treasured in their memories, and willingly recorded after a lapse of three and a half years, surely shows that these men, whose evidence is given in a perfectly blunt, honest, and soldierly manner, were not so bitter as to deny the smallest good action that came their way. Incidentally, it accentuates the stark truth of the other side of the slate, now to be revealed.

THE GERMAN RED CROSS.

“At Cologne,” says Lieut.-Colonel Neish, of the Gordon Highlanders, taken from Mons to Sennelager about the end of August, 1914, “I saw a female with a Red Cross badge on her, after serving our escort with coffee, deliberately pour remaining contents of the can on the ground when requested to allow us to have some.”

"At every considerable station," says Major E. H. Jones, R.F.A., taken from Cambrai to Torgau between August 31 and September 3, 1914, "there were Red Cross women who gave our guards coffee, food, cigars, etc., but who absolutely refused us even water. I do not think that so much as a cup of water was given to us by the German Red Cross during the whole journey. . . . We met with the same treatment all along the line at the hands of the Red Cross and the crowd."

Major Arthur S. Peebles, of the Suffolk Regiment, taken from Cambrai to Torgau between August 31 and September 3, 1914, says: "At one station we asked two Red Cross 'ladies' for a glass of water, saying it was for a wounded officer: they burst out laughing and said, 'Nothing for you English.'"

"The German Red Cross," says Captain Beaman, R.A.M.C., taken from Mons to Torgau between September 1 and 4, 1914, "gave no food to prisoners, wounded or otherwise. At times it is shown to them and then withdrawn, with kindly remarks that it is not for swine."

"Very frequently," says Lieut.-Colonel Collingwood, R.A.M.C., taken from Mons to Torgau between September 1 and 4, 1914, "when our men asked for coffee or soup of the Red Cross workers they were spat at, or had their mugs knocked out of their hands."

Major Furness, of the R.A.M.C., dealing with the same journey, says: "The Red Cross representatives were everywhere, if possible, the most venomous. I was told by other officers that they spat on the food before serving it to the English prisoners."

“The Red Cross women treated us vilely. The women referred to are those to be found on the railway stations for the purpose of supplying refreshments to the troops passing through. They came to the carriage windows with coffee and sandwiches, showed us these things, and took them away without giving us anything. At some places they spat at us.” This is the evidence of Captain Browne, R.A.M.C., who testifies above to the kindness of the guard, thus proving beyond all doubt the sincerity of his indictment of the German Red Cross women.

Captain Hargreaves, Somerset Light Infantry, has also been mentioned. Hear him on the German Red Cross: “At Liège I tried personally to get the German Red Cross officials to give our wounded men water. They refused. I saw some German Red Cross nurses actually bring water in cans up to our men, show it to them, and then pour it on the platform. This also happened to me personally. At Aix-la-Chapelle there was an elaborate Red Cross dressing-station. All water and food was rigorously refused us. The German wounded in the train had their wounds dressed. This was refused us.”

Captain Fraser, R.A.M.C., taken from Cambrai to Döberitz between September 3 and 8, 1914, also bears testimony to this “refinement” of cruelty. “The Red Cross officials and women,” he says, “brought soup to the train, showed it to the British, then took it away, calling them swine and blackguards. The women were almost worse in this respect than the men.”

Major R. F. Meiklejohn, of the Royal Warwicks, taken from Cambrai to Brunswick in the early days of September of the same year, is likely to remember the German

Red Cross officials to the day of his death. "Throughout this journey," he says, "the conduct of the German women, especially those dressed as Red Cross nurses, was revolting and barbarous beyond words, and, as a result of the continuous brutality of Red Cross women and officials, many prisoners of war besides myself have still a repugnance to seeing a Red Cross armlet. During September 5 we appeared to be making a tour of Germany 'on exhibition,' being insulted in every way, especially by Red Cross women. . . . During this day also soup was emptied on the platforms in front of our carriage when we asked for it, and the conduct of the German populace, and especially that of Red Cross women and officials, was barbarous."

Major H. W. Long, R.A.M.C., during the Mons-Torgau journey in the early days of September, learnt something of German women that astonished him. "The German Red Cross took no notice of us, and did not even give us water. I pointed to my own Red Cross, but without effect. I could not believe that women could behave so cruelly."

A particularly bad case is recorded by Captain J. H. W. Knight-Bruce, of the Royal Warwicks. This incident occurred during the journey from Bertry to Duisburg, September 9, 1914. "Our English doctor," he says, "called the attention of a German doctor to a man in my carriage with a grazed femoral artery, which had to be contained by a tourniquet all the time owing to the jolting, causing the man great suffering. The German doctor was very rude at being asked about the case, and refused to allow the man to be taken out. This man died a few days later of hæmorrhage. He would most certainly have

recovered if he had been taken out and kept quiet, as the graze was not severe."

Captain Thomas, of the Munster Fusiliers, is the officer who paid a tribute to the young German drummer-boy, quoted above. He has a very different tale to tell of this drummer-boy's "superiors." "Before the train started again," he says, "some German soldiers came and searched me, and in doing so knocked me about rather badly, while a German Red Cross man stood by and applauded them, and said if they found a knife on me he would cut my throat with it. . . . The German Red Cross people at the stations were particularly bad. One night in the train the tube in my throat became nearly stopped up, and I could not breathe, so the Unter-Offizier in charge called a doctor who was on the train, and he came and poked at it with a piece of stick that he had cut out of the hedge by the line." The unfortunate victim generously adds that this rough treatment "freed my respiration a little."

"We were met on the platform," says Captain H. O. Sutherland, of the Northumberland Fusiliers, who travelled from Sissonne to Giessen between November 14 and 16, 1914, "by German Red Cross orderlies. One of these lifted a private, who had a leg and an arm broken, out of the carriage, held him over a stretcher about two to three feet above it, and then deliberately let him drop."

Lieut. Dennys, of the Somerset Light Infantry, taken from Le Quesnoy to Lille, December 19 and 20, 1914, was compelled by a German hospital nurse to walk 100 yards, through a crowd of hilarious Germans, utterly naked save for a pair of socks.

The stories of the men, though briefer, amply bear out

the behaviour of the German "angels of mercy." "We saw some German Red Cross nurses," says Private C. Brash (No. 8927), Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. "The only thing I remember about them is that some of them spat in our faces."

THE GERMAN OFFICERS.

And what of the German officers at this period? What was the attitude of these gentlemen—whose modest ambition it is to subdue the whole world and model all humanity after their fashion—towards the prisoners of war entrusted to their care? What steps did they take to preserve and exalt the good name of the Fatherland?

"The new officer in charge of the train," says Captain Middleton, R.A.M.C., taken from Hal to Hanover, August 28-30, 1914, "was the other and more plentiful type, the loud-voiced bully and cad. We, in our ignorance, came to the conclusion that he must be either half drunk or not quite sane. After constantly meeting the type for a number of months we know now that he was neither of these things—only German."

"At Mons Bergen," says Major Vandaleur, of the Scottish Rifles, taken from Douai to Crefeld, October 17-20, 1914. "I was pulled out in front of the wagon by the order of the officer in charge of the station, and, after cursing me in filthy language for some ten minutes, he ordered one of his soldiers to kick me back into the wagon, which he did, sending me sprawling into the filthy mess at the bottom of the wagon."

"An officer, seeing that some of us were very footsore,

told the escort to put a lance through anyone who could not keep up.” This is the evidence of Captain Young, Cheshire Regiment, who was in the same party with Major Vandaleur, and corroborates every word of the Major’s story.

Sergeant R. Gilling (No. 4652), of the Scots Greys, taken from Mons to Osnabrück in September, 1914, learnt something of German officers. “The moment we arrived at Mons,” he testifies, “we all were taken into the station, where two trainloads of German troops had just arrived. These troops were drawn up in two lines; we were made to march through the lines, and were subjected to gross insults and ill-treatment. Curses were hurled at us, the men spat on us and kicked us, we were struck with sabres and bayonets, and Germans were not particular as to whether flesh wounds were inflicted or not; very many men with crutches had these kicked from under their arms, and when patients fell the crutches were used to beat them with. During this episode German officers and N.C.O.’s were with their men, and they, far from discouraging their men, encouraged them, even to the extent of cursing us in German and English and of taking part in these cowardly assaults. The officers were not young officers, but I saw many captains. I knew their badges, because I had a small pamphlet which I had studied.”

How long will it take the German Army to live down such deeds as these? What nation under the sun, however small and weak, would not rather be wiped out to the last child than live under the heels of such foul monsters? Surely the day of reckoning shall come !

And the reckoning must be paid, not only by the German

soldiers and officers, not only by the German Red Cross officials, male and female, but also by the equally guilty German populace. Had they shown any pity for our prisoners we might have believed those who tell us that the German civilian is a long-suffering and kindly creature, who must be regarded as the victim of the militarist party. The following extracts will exhibit the non-combatant German in a very different light:—

THE GERMAN POPULACE.

"The town was well lighted," says Major E. H. Jones, quoted above, "and the crowds immense. All the house fronts, hotels, etc., were filled with well-dressed, well-fed people. We had great difficulty in getting through a hostile crowd, which abused us, spat at us, and threatened violence. They were drunk with wine and with hatred for us. Most of them were well-dressed people from the middle classes."

"Leaving the station," says Major Arthur S. Peebles, also quoted above, "we found the streets densely packed with people, soldiers, men, women, and children, all singing, shouting, spitting—a perfectly indescribable scene. There were several instances of spitting straight into an officer's face, also of kicking and striking with sticks; the situation was critical. . . . At one large house there were several 'ladies' in evening dress standing at an open window shouting and shaking their fists at us. The march, the whole way from the station, had been most humiliating and degrading, throughout which we had been subjected to continual abuse and revilement."

“At the station,” says Captain Hargreaves, also quoted above, “before we started to march up the street to the barracks, and whilst I was on the platform (my head bandaged), a German woman (well-dressed) put her head out of a first-class carriage window and spat in my face.”

“From the time of leaving Cambrai,” says Captain Beresford, of the Worcestershire Regiment, taken from Cambrai to Mainz, October 16-20, 1914, “one was insulted at every stop, which were very frequent, and people crowded round the carriage, women included, and called one every name they could think of.”

Here is a testimonial that the inhabitants of Coblenz may relish. It comes from Lieut. Dobson, R.N.D., taken from Brussels to Frankfurt in the first days of December, 1914. “The city,” he says, “will always live in my memory on account of my recollections of its women. These creatures. . . .”

“German women came round and abused us and spat at us.” So says Private C. H. Fussell (No. 6648), 1st Somerset Light Infantry, taken from Cambrai to Senne-lager, September, 1914.

It will be seen that care has been taken to identify fully in each case the officer or man giving evidence. Their words are here printed for all the world to read, and they are prepared to stand by them.

The witnesses have spoken. It is for the civilized world to examine their statements, to realize that the whole cannot even be published for general reading, and to give the verdict.

